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ABSTRACT

The term "disintermediation" has developed to describe the finding of information by an end-user without the need for a third party. New developments in techniques for retrieval and dissemination have led to a situation where an end-user can acquire the basic skills necessary for searching the myriad databases available. The information professional needs to become more proactive and add value to the end product in order to meet the challenge of new technology. This paper includes a basic discussion of the pros and cons of disintermediation, training, subject awareness and end-user confidence, and disintermediation as the discipline of the future. The paper concludes with a case study of working practices of enquiry in the library at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (London, United Kingdom). Librarians and information workers have always been able to adapt their working practices to fit the requirements of their community. Librarians have to accept that others will begin to impinge on what they have always seen as their "territory," but if they develop their jobs in line with the demands of the technology, they should find that disintermediation acts as a discipline and does not become a disaster. Individuals will find that their jobs become far more highly profiled and their contributions to the data handling within their organizations will be marked. (Author/SWC)

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Disintermediation: a disaster or a discipline?

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Abstract: *The term 'disintermediation' has developed to describe the finding of information by an end-user without the need for a third party. New developments in techniques for retrieval and dissemination have led to a situation where an end-user can acquire the basic skills necessary for searching the myriad databases available. The information professional needs to become more proactive and add value to the end product in order to meet the challenge of new technology.*
The paper concludes with a case study of working practices in the library at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, UK.

Keywords: Disintermediation, database searching, Internet, information provision

1. Introduction

Disintermediation is a term that has been adopted from the economic sector, meaning the investment of money without the mediation of a bank or other controlling factor. In the information profession the term is being increasingly used to indicate that data is being obtained by the end-user without the assistance of a third party.

This is the latest in a chain of events to affect the working practices of the information professional, and might to some perhaps appear as a threat on the horizon. Developments in the past have been enhancements to the professional way of working — the convenience of automated loan systems in the late 1970s and early 1980s; the increased availability of online systems to search ever more remote databases; and the ease with which they can be used, with facilities such as Lotus Notes and the evolution of Windows software in the 1990s. But the presence of these computers and their software is transcending the business environment, and now a vast number of individuals have access to a personal or laptop computer with which they can move their working environment from the office, to the train, to the aeroplane and back to an outpost in a different country — all without the need for an intermediary.

2. A Challenge or a chore?

How should the information professional perceive the new working environment? As a disaster or as a discipline? Enquirers now have a better awareness of the services that they believe they should be offered. The Internet, for example, regularly has column inches devoted to it in the national press, not only in the computer sections or the merger sections in the business pages, but in the general news pages, featuring stories on how it has been used to trap one of the FBI's most wanted criminals in Guatemala, or how a couple on opposite sides of the Atlantic 'met' and fell in love via a chat group. More and more businesses are realising that they can use the Internet for advertising, or electronic ordering. The relatively low cost of an Internet subscription means that more and more people are accessing it at home, becoming familiar with the World Wide Web due to the ease of use of Windows software. One of the aspects which the information professional might consider to be a threat is, how many of these individuals are managing a budget that contains an information professional at work? How many of them are asking 'what does that person do that I can't do?' 'What is value-added about my librarian or information scientist?'

So far, disintermediation sounds like a threat. The threat comes from the availability of computerised systems and the ease with which they can be used. Individuals are able to access networks such as the Internet from their PCs at home — what is to stop them from doing it at their desks in the office? This is where reality has to be faced — a lack of time. Unless one has a dedicated ISDN or Ethernet line, much of the time spent retrieving data from the Internet is waiting for links to be made or data to download. How many people have the spare capacity to wait five minutes for a file to download or print? How many have the time to use a search engine to find new sources of information? The Internet is a vast, continually growing entity — someone has to be able to spend time looking at new Usenet groups or Web sites in case some vital piece of information is missed. It has to be acknowledged, however, that the vast majority of data on the Internet is chaff, but the fact nevertheless remains that somebody has to be able to whittle out the wheat.

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3. Training

An important aspect of disintermediation concerns training. Thorough professional training is required to get the most out of an information retrieval system — but individuals can gain a basic knowledge of a system with little or no training. From the financial viewpoint, this is particularly important and may be a reason why CD-ROMs are becoming more significant in the marketplace. Why should an organisation spend money sending an information professional on a specialised training course when other employees can discover the delights of an online or CD-ROM system with simple hands-on trial and error? But will employees want to learn these skills? The University of Westminster spent some time actively encouraging its academic staff to access the Internet, and in their turn, to encourage students to do the same 'but by mid 1995 use had not increased sufficiently to strain the network' (Ref 2).

Gloria Dinerman (Ref 3) has suggested that training takes many forms, from training staff to training the public. Our end-users will need us as intermediaries to instil in them the concepts that will lead to successful and efficient searching. Having said that, what is the difference between a successful search and an unsuccessful one? This is an area that has been closely studied by David Nicholas (Ref 5). His paper studied the online skills of journalists at the *Guardian* newspaper and compared them with those of the librarians. It was found that the journalists (the end-users) were equally as productive as the librarians, although their searches either produced few or many references, while those of the librarians tended to fall in-between. One of his main conclusions was that the end-users required only a basic perception of searching strategies before being able to carry out a search that, in their view, was acceptable.

4. Subject awareness and end-user confidence

The information professional can, therefore, view disintermediation as a potential disaster. I believe it to be a potential discipline, a challenge. Librarians and information scientists will have to become more proactive in their work. They need to seek out new information sources, to recommend them and to deliver timely data to the desk of the person who didn't realise, until that moment, that it was just what he or she needed. Information professionals will need to target the requirements of the workplace more directly and to present the resulting data in such a way that enquirers realise that they would not have had the time to do that investigation themselves.

An important question that has to be raised in connection with evaluation of data by the information professional is, how do individuals know what is of use and what is not? If they already have subject knowledge, this is irrelevant — many information professionals have a first degree in, or prior knowledge of, a subject. Once they become involved in information provision to specialists, this knowledge — if they don't have it already — becomes expected. Evaluation of data, initially in conjunction with the specialist, leads to a development of recognition of gems within the garbage.

This, then is the heart of the matter. This is the challenge which faces the information professional in the final years of the twentieth century. End-users will carry out many of the repetitious searches which the more experienced professional dreads, but when it comes down to needing more detailed data, the end-user will discover that he or she has neither the knowledge or experience required to obtain detailed results. Another term currently appearing in the management press is empowerment. Will disintermediation empower our end-users? I don't believe so. They realise that this simple computer and keypad needs to be in the hands of an experienced individual to get the best from the system, and as a result the information professional gains in status and recognition.

5. The discipline of the future

Earlier I mentioned the fact that the Internet can easily be accessed by individuals at home. But without the intermediaries, how would the end-user find the information required? Searching any database effectively means knowing the best way to do so. Generally there is just one method of doing so. Searching the Internet, however, means using several tools — for example, Gopher, Archie, Veronica, WAIS — all of which use different techniques. What do Lycos, or Yahoo, do if not act as an intermediary? And how did they get onto the Internet? Another individual, or group of individuals, put them there. We are therefore all dependent on each other.

The Internet is the one 'popular' aspect of the information professional's job which has seized the imagination of the person on the street. There are, of course, all the other databases to which we have had access for a number of years — those hosted by Knight-Ridder, FT Profile and MAID, to name just a few. How long will it be before companies currently working with these hosts decide to disintermediate them and mount their data on the Internet instead? I do not see that happening to any great extent, although it is possible that a number of the smaller companies may feel it is easier — and in the long term, more profitable — to mount their own information than pay another organisation to manage it for them. The developments in electronic banking and secure transactions are posing concern to the financial sector, and a consultant from IBM has indicated that disintermediation within the computer suppliers industry will become more widespread over time (Ref 4). In a similar vein, the political and social leverage enjoyed by the media industry through the news and advertising may be on a downward slide as more news becomes available digitally via online delivery systems (Ref 1).

What faces the information industry in the future? Will the software providers use the Internet as their main

platform for development? Intranet systems, mimicking Internet processes, will allow the application of standards like SGML to provide a uniform structure for the provision of information. Neural networks will gradually 'learn' to perform value-added functions which once used to be performed by humans. These developments will become commonplace in companies eager to embrace the technology.

6. Case study

As a case study approach to disintermediation, I would like to outline some of the recent developments in working practices on the enquiry side of the library service at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), London.

Since the early 1990s, the FCO library service has developed to embrace a team structure. Four enquiry teams, each consisting of three staff, cover specific geographical regions and functional departments. Three of the four teams also deal with enquiries from British Embassies, High Commissions and Consulates (Posts) overseas. Prior to this team structure, enquiries were dealt with on an *ad hoc* basis. Staff rarely dealt with the same enquirer — or subject — on a regular basis.

The team structure has led to a development of knowledge in subject areas. The librarians dealing with Middle Eastern and African countries, for example, have acquired an awareness of events in those countries and are often able to pre-empt an enquiry by faxing a news article to the appropriate Post or by contacting the relevant department in London. They scan periodicals regularly for articles of interest and are able to produce an SDI service, as well as select books for stock and advise on items to be kept locally at Post. The same developments have occurred for each team. The members of the Management team deal with the information requirements of functional departments and senior FCO management, and therefore have acquired knowledge not necessarily related to specific countries but of personnel issues, arms control, environmental policy and the United Nations, to name just a few subjects.

Staff have also been posted to FCO departments within the FCO in London. There are professionally qualified librarians working in the Diplomatic Service Language Centre, the United Nations documents section and the Research and Analysis Department (RAD). Having started work as the RAD librarian in October 1994 I will outline the work in which I am most involved.

The librarian in RAD is known as the information manager for the department. This means that not only do I act as a liaison point between the main library and the research analysts, but I am also responsible for the departmental computer system and network. The position arose as a result of a Cabinet Office-directed efficiency scrutiny of the structures of both the Library and Records Department and the Research and Analysis Department. The scrutiny recommended the appointment of a librarian to work with the research analysts to cut down any duplication of effort between the output of the two departments.

One of the first tasks I carried out was an information audit. This established the sources of information already used by analysts as well as the sources they were aware of but didn't use, and the reasons for this. As a result, an intensive information awareness strategy was developed, using not only the electronic mail facility already familiar and available on the departmental network, but also a newsletter called *ReAD IT*. This focused not only on training aspects of the network already in place, but also highlighted new information sources available via the Internet and other databases.

The department already had a subscription to an Internet Service Provider (ISP) and had subscribed to a number of listservs. However, a major problem was that the e-mail was checked on an irregular basis, and therefore information was rarely current by the time it got to the end-user. I set up a simple system whereby the e-mail was checked regularly each morning, downloaded to disk and virus-checked before being loaded onto the departmental network and sent to the terminal of the relevant user. The use of the newsletter to highlight database details and sites of interest led to an increased awareness of the availability of the Internet. By mid 1995 there were five standalone PCs around the department being used for Internet access. This did not, however, lead to disintermediation for the RAD librarian. There was an on-going need for training, but once an individual was sufficiently competent to be 'let loose', many found that they did not have to the time to wait for sites to load. This resulted in a greater demand for Internet searches to be done by the librarian. Many sites were regularly updated, thus leading to an increased requirement for proactive consumer awareness.

Regular attendance at Heads of Section meetings were crucial to my own understanding of current hot topics, and meant I could produce items for individual analysts which were relevant to their research topic before being asked. This raised the profile of the librarian's position and in turn increased demand for information from my colleagues in the main library. Analysts were offered organised visits to the library — something that few of them had ever undertaken — and this enhanced their understanding of the levels of assistance that were available.

Visits to external organisations such as BBC Monitoring widened the network of prime sources, and the installation of the Reuters Business Briefing database led to a demand for daily headline listings on specific countries, as well as frequent updates on major news stories of the day. The 'career academics' — many of whom are on secondment to the FCO from universities or other organisations — seem to have a greater need for hard copy to back up their research papers, and will accept and devour information voraciously, while long-established members of the FCO research cadre often use the corporate memory and their exhaustive files to produce equally excellent background research for inclusion in future foreign policy decisions.

7. Conclusion

Librarians and information workers have always been able to adapt their working practices to fit the requirements of their community. We have to accept that others will begin to impinge on what we have always seen as 'our territory', but if we develop our jobs in line with the demands — note I do not say the limitations — of the technology then we should find that disintermediation acts as a discipline and does not become a disaster. Individuals will find that their jobs become far more highly profiled and their contributions to the data handling within their organisations will be marked.

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